

## Abundance

A family fell on hard times here in town.

Mom, dad and 5 year old daughter were struggling to make ends meet.

In the house was a special wrapping paper and ribbon.

Very expensive and reserved for a special occasion.

The little girl finds herself a box one day, so she wraps it with that pricey paper and gives it to her dad.

And he's more than a little irritated.

"Why did you use **this** paper?"

"But daddy, I made it just for you!

Open it!" she says.

The box is empty.

Now he's mad.

"You've ruined our special wrapping paper on an empty box?!"

"But it's not empty daddy!

"Before I closed the box, I put 100 kisses inside, just for you!"

A few years later the little girl dies.

And the father, from time to time, opens that box and holds it to his face; and feels once again his little girl's kisses.

I think that story has something in common with today's gospel lesson, about the miracle of the loaves and the fishes.

It's the only miracle story to be told by all four gospels.

This story meant a lot to the early church, because it takes us right to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

And it's a story of how easy it is to get distracted by the outward appearance of things — while missing the priceless gift inside.

Here's the scene.

A huge crowd gathers.

They're hungry, far from any 7-11 or McDonalds.

They come because Jesus is healing the sick, the lame, the blind.

As evening creeps in, the disciples, looking only at the wrapping, tell Jesus to send everyone away, since, looking only at the wrapping, it seems the prudent thing to do.

They're focused on the appearance of things; on the little they have: two fish, five loaves.

"Nothing' is what we have," they say.

Perhaps they're a bit nervous too.

After all, in a crowd of 5000 hungry and tired men, things can get ugly.

But Jesus isn't nervous.

"Everyone take a seat," he says.

"Relax, take the load off!"

Jesus reminds us not to be fooled by the wrapping, but to always look at what's inside the box.

Because inside the box is the always alive, yet often hidden, power of God, to meet the needs of the people.

So Jesus takes bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and shares it.

Some may be thinking of the Passover meal.

We may think of the Eucharist.

But no matter what anyone's thinking, everyone has enough.

So much so that twelve baskets of leftovers are gathered!

And yet, ironically, full stomachs turn everyone's attention back to the wrapping.

In one of the gospel's, the crowd wants to make Jesus a king!

Which sends Jesus into hiding.

They want to make him king because he's filled their bellies.

But a full belly is only a small part of what's happening.

The abundance of food is more than a meal.

It's a sign of the abundance God showers on us every day.

Abundance that doesn't stop at our physical needs.

It's an abundance that meets our needs for love and companionship and community and friendship.

Most folks miss that point, back then – and today.

Why is it so hard to see the here and now miracle of God's abundance?

Why do we so often feel that we don't have enough?

Why do we hoard our stuff, rather than sharing it?

It was St Basil who says:

"When someone steals another's clothes, we call them a thief.

Doesn't the same name apply to one who could clothe the naked, and doesn't?

The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry.

The coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it.

The shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes.

The money which you hoard — belongs to the poor.”

Why do we hold on so tight to so much?

There are many reasons.

We live in a society that depends on consumption.

The more we have — the more we think we need.

And if we try to escape, the constant bombardment of our consumer society ensures we don't get very far.

And yet we are surrounded by abundance.

Abundance that flows from our labor.

Abundance that is a free gift from God.

Today's gospel lesson calls us to first recognize, then savor, then share, the abundance we have.

We know there is plenty to eat in this world!

But people in Aiea and Alabama and Albania will go to bed hungry tonight.

Perhaps the most spot-on definition of “sin” is this:

It's when we dam up the free flow of God's abundance, fearing we might not have enough.

Truth be told, we are a nation of dam builders.

"Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps," we say.

But Jesus is not a dam builder.

He breaks dams down!

No one on that grassy hillside is asked to justify their hunger.

They are simply fed, graciously, and with a smile.

In so doing, Jesus lifts the veil on what it means to follow him.

It's about trust.

Trust in God's goodness, that alone has the power to free us from obsessive worries over security, control and safety.

To live with a quiet confidence that knows in its bones that "where we cannot, God can."

Practicing this way of life allows us to discover that in the letting go, we can find our heart's desire.

Like the old man from the small island of Foa.

He deeply loves his land, and he's dying.

So he asks his sons to carry him outside, and lay him on the ground, so he can feel the earth on his skin.

Taking his last breath, he grasps some dirt, holding it tightly in his hand, as he dies, happy.

When he arrives at heaven's gate, God sends out an old woman for him.

"Welcome to the joys of heaven!"

But as the old man starts through the gate, the woman says:

"Please, you must let the soil go."

"No!" says the old man.

"Never!"

Sadly, she goes away, leaving the man outside the gate.

Time passes.

Then God sends the old man's best friend to invite him in.

They talk, drink, until his friend says:

"Alright, come inside now."

"But you gotta let go of the dirt."

Again, the old man refuses.

His friend walks sadly away.

More time passes and God sends none other than the old man's beloved granddaughter, the apple of his eye!

"Grandpa, you're so wonderful and we miss you so much!"

Please come inside with me.”

The old man nods.

As she helps him to his feet, and as they together move toward heaven’s gate, the hand that for all those years clutched that piece of his beloved island, gives way.

That which he held onto so tightly for so long, finally and at last, falls away.

And as he enters heaven’s gate, waiting for him, in all its glory, is his beloved island.

We so often cling tightly to what we think we need, only to delay our encounter with what we really desire.

We so often obsess about the expensive wrapping, while missing the priceless, hidden treasure, within.

It’s said that the Christian life is an experimental life.

A life that’s not about codes or laws or rulebooks.

With no “i’s” to dot or “t’s” to cross.

Instead, the Christian life might be summed up like this:

“Love, and do as you will.” Augustine of Hippo.

Perhaps this week, we can pay attention to how easily we are distracted by the fancy wrappings of life.

And then take a moment to really experiment with letting go.



Perhaps this week, we can pay attention to the abundance in our lives.

And recognize that if we can just let go of what we think we need, we just might receive our heart's desire.

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